

the Henry George News

PUBLISHED BY HENRY GEORGE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE • NOVEMBER 1964

The Paradoxes of George

by CLYDE E. REEVES

THE title of Henry George's major book, *Progress and Poverty*, and the main thesis that underlies his significant work is a huge paradox. The paradox is universally recognized as a powerful instrument of destruction. In its bite is an indictment. For exposing the sham, condemning the fraud, and castigating the unjust, it is without peer.

As might be expected, in George's speeches as well as his writings, we find the paradox one of his favorite and most frequently used devices and probably his most effective tool. Rare indeed is a speech of his, major or minor, and he made more than 800 of them, that does not confront the audience member with at least one ironic paradox, usually current, or within reach of his imagination.

To an Irish audience he points out the irony of thousands of emaciated Irish children literally starving to death while thousands of pounds worth of Irish-grown food are loaded on ships and transported to England where there is no food shortage at all. He points to hundreds of poverty-class men, women and children living in windowless houses in France, deprived of air and light, not because windows are expensive or scarce, but because there is a "window tax" they can't afford to pay. In addition to these



factual paradoxes taken from life, George also used the hypothetical or fictional paradox of his own invention to great advantage, such as Robinson Crusoe's position when he

refuses to take Friday as his chattel slave, then claims the island and all of the seas surrounding it and requires Friday to give up as rent everything he can produce except enough for mere existence.

Paradoxes not only redound in his speeches and writings, but they seem to have surrounded the man during his lifetime and ever since. Cecil B. deMille recalls that people were either passionately for him or passionately against him. Yet Anna deMille, George's daughter, notes from her personal experience that virtually everyone with whom he came in contact, friend or opponent, appeared to respect and even to love him. In my own inspection of any number of commentators contemporary with George I have yet to find a critic, however sharp, who does not render praise of one kind or another, sometimes rather grudgingly, but generally quite will-

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 1)

ingly—a very paradoxical situation for a very controversial figure.

He entered the field of practical politics, not once but a number of times, and at a number of different levels—a field in which in his day and ours, and every other day in recorded history, success and the retaining of personal integrity intact are anathema to each other. Yet he never, to my knowledge, sacrificed one iota of his personal integrity—a situation so paradoxical among politicians as to be unique. In fact there is another paradox in the almost ridiculous ease with which he seems to have turned aside, not only in his own time but for all time, all imputations against his integrity. It is almost as if the men who brought the charges didn't believe them themselves, and pursued them only half-heartedly.

From his own day to the present George has been labeled as a Marxist, a socialist and a communist by people who did not begin to comprehend the nature of what he was proposing. Apparently those who called him a Marxist, never bothered to find out that Marx himself labeled *Progress and Poverty* "the last ditch of capitalism." Neither, apparently, have those who called him a socialist bothered to learn that the socialists of Great Britain, the United States and elsewhere, after going only a little way down the common pathway with George, drew apart to go their own, individual, separate collectivist ways.

On the contrary, as Albert Jay Nock, Charles Albro Barker, Anna deMille and others tell us, George was probably the greatest champion of private property, in everything else but land and other "natural monopolies." He wanted the wealth created through labor or the genius of the individual to remain one hundred per cent and for all time, individual in nature and pos-

This is a shortened version of an address by Professor Clyde E. Reeves of Temple University, Philadelphia on September 2, 1964. (Photo by George W. Lachner of San Bruno, California.)

session; and nobody, past, present or future can be more individualistic than that. Beyond a hundred per cent we cannot go. At the same time he wanted the wealth created by society itself, by the press of increasing population for the use of the land and other natural monopolies, to remain one hundred per cent that of society; and nobody, past, present or future could be more collectivist than that.

With his left foot planted further left than the most advanced collectivist, and his right foot further right than the most rugged individualist, what, then, was George? The answer, it seems, is rather obvious. George was himself a paradox. He was the most socialistic-individualist the world has ever seen, the most spiritual-materialist, and the most humanitarian exponent of laissez-faire. In his honest concern for protecting individual rights and individual property his position was the most "isolationist," and in his land policy the most "internationalist." For the single human being as a small "one" he had a great and genuine understanding—and for all mankind, as a large "one," as full and complete an insight. He demonstrated in the most convincing and concrete way that it is possible, within one philosophical system and one man, to bring together those two opposite positions which, in the efforts of each to "bury" the other, seem about to "bury" the world.

If today, one hundred and twenty-five years after George's birth and seventy-five after *Progress and Poverty*, we can't find in the paradox of George the answer to our pressing "one-world" question, we can at least find there a reasonable hope of finding an answer.